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Community Options fights the wolf

Agency reaches out for funding to keep programs alive

By Lisa Young Staff Writer

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Tom Turner, Community Options Inc. executive director, looks over the agency's 47th annual report submitted in October.

Lisa Young/ Delta County Independent

Editor's note: This is the first in a three part series on Community Options, Inc., what the organization provides to its service communities, its history, its financial situation and what is being done to attempt to keep it running. If you have any information about the organization or have a story about how COI has impacted your life or the life of a family member, please send an email to editor@deltacountyindependent.com.

Tom Turner, executive director at Community Options, Inc. (COI), used the word "catastrophic" when describing the current financial situation of the six county non-profit that provides services to 500 people with intellectual/developmental disabilities and provides employment to 200 persons in the area.

Turner and board president Darcy Arnold made an impassioned plea to the Delta County Board of Commissioners last month asking for \$50,000 in emergency aid. Arnold said the additional funds would "fill the gap and make us whole through 2020 and ward off another year of six-figure losses."

The unusual request is 12 times the amount (\$4,000) that the county currently contributes. Only a few weeks ago Turner and Arnold made the same request from Montrose County where they were given an additional \$12,500, matching their budgeted amount.

Turner told Delta commissioners that COI was deemed “no longer being a going concern” at their last audit meaning there’s good reason to believe that the agency will not be operational in another year.

Already, COI plans to cut staff and outsourced their home care to other agencies after deciding to relinquish their Class B Home Care Agency (HCA) license citing an “overwhelming list of administrative requirements for us to implement in order to renew.”

Turner also said the decision to forego the license had to do with the “impending implementation of Electronic Visit Verification,” a controversial program involving GPS tracking of caregivers. (See related article in Delta County Independent-Dec. 25 page A8).

“We’ve all heard about big banks being too big to fail, quite frankly I think what we do is too important to fail,” Turner told commissioners.

The current financial dilemma has been in the making for a number of years. Last year Turner entitled his annual report letter “Keeping the Wolf from the Door.” This year’s grim title reads, “The Wolf has Arrived.”

In this year’s report, Turner said, “We have continued working diligently on solutions both internally and with our state partners, but the only thing that has really changed is that another year has gone by, we finished that year with another six-figure deficit, and that wolf is huffing and puffing and threatening to blow our house down.”

The 47 year-old organization that began in Delta is fighting three “wolves” that are rapidly devouring the organization’s ability to continue to provide necessary services in the area.

Turner cited the passage of Amendment 70 in the 2016 election which began incrementally raising the minimum wage from \$9.30 in 2017 to \$12 in 2020.

While he is pleased to see underpaid direct support professionals make more money, the change has increased payroll by \$700,000 per year without any change in rate increases to offset it.

“Over the past five years the wages of our direct support workforce have gone up by 39% while we have had only minimal increases in our already-inadequate Medicaid rates,” he said.

The second wolf, has been hanging around since 2008 when the state made a drastic change to the client waiting list that has negatively impacted all 10 rural Community Care Boards in Colorado. The move seems to favor Front Range providers in more populated areas and ignores the rural providers who cover 73% of the state's land mass.

In a nutshell, if a client passes away or leaves the local service provider, rather than having the local agency fill the spot with the next person on their waiting list the slot becomes available statewide. As a result, Community Options provides residential services to 15 fewer people than they were 11 years ago resulting in a 15% reduction in clients served and hundreds of thousand dollars in lost revenue.

Community Options and other agencies on the Western Slope are also staring down some of the highest health insurance costs in the nation. While COI has downgraded coverage to employees, their premiums have increased 63% in the past five years resulting in a big bite to the budget. In an attempt to save more money, they've gone to a self-funded insurance hoping to save as much as \$100,000 per year.

On the bright side, Arnold said the agency anticipates a rate increase from the Colorado Department of Health Care Policy and Financing the first of January that would bring in roughly \$55,000. That amount however, will not keep the wolf away for long.

In the meantime, Arnonld and Turner said they will continue to reach out to area counties and municipalities, as well as members of the State's Legislator for the needed funding while they wait for Delta County's answer.